

July 15, 2002

To: Colleagues in the Rutgers Business School

From: Glenn Shafer

Re: What can we do about the growing power of commercial journal publishers?

In early May, I had the privilege of attending a symposium in New Brunswick that focused on the implications of the growing power of the publishers of academic journals. Several other RBS faculty members were also in attendance, including Bikki Jaggi, dt ogilvie, and Mike Rothkopf, but I felt at the time that others would also have been interested. Our recent e-mail discussion about books and journals reminded me of this, inspiring me to write and distribute this report.

The meeting, on May 9, was sponsored by

1. Vice Presidents Seneca and Flanagan,
2. the Academic Leadership Program
<http://www.odl.rutgers.edu/academicleadership/index.htm>,
3. the New Brunswick Faculty Council, and
4. the University Libraries.

The speakers were

1. Martin Blume, Editor-in-Chief of the American Physical Society,
2. Marianne Gaunt, University Librarian,
3. Haym Hirsch, Professor of Computer Science at Rutgers, who recently participated in the revolt by 40 editors of Kluwer's journal *Machine Learning*, who resigned in mass and set up an independent e-journal, the *Journal of Machine Learning Research*,
4. Heather Joseph, President of BioOne, which works with medium-sized journals in the biological sciences to help them move online while staying independent of the for-profit publishers.
5. Stanley Katz, Professor at Princeton and former president of the American Council of Learned Societies, who has taken a leadership role in moving the humanities online.
6. Joachim Kohn, Professor of Chemistry at Rutgers and gadfly on the topic,
7. Michael Lesk, who has worked to encourage online journals as a program officer at NSF.

Some of the speakers' complaints:

1. The increasing price of academic journals (up another 50% in the last four years) continues to squeeze university libraries. They have been steadily cutting back on their book purchases, as measured both by the number of new books acquired and by the dollars spent on books.
2. The commercial academic journal industry is now very concentrated. Elsevier is the largest player; Wiley is second. If I understood, correctly, the Rutgers Library pays these two publishers alone a million dollars a year for journals.
3. Unfortunately, this money does not buy anything permanent for Rutgers. It only rents the publisher's journals online for the year.

4. The publishers largely control which journals the libraries can afford to acquire, because they price the journals in packages, just as cable companies market television channels.
5. The journals controlled by these publishers can no longer be regarded as permanent archives of knowledge. Although the journals produce a few paper copies in order to satisfy our outdated picture of what a real journal is, these copies are no longer systematically stored by anyone. The publishers are making great efforts, with increasing success, to assure that the electronic files are stored in only one place, so that they can control all reproduction. They offer pious assurances that they will protect these files in perpetuity, but no one believes that they will keep these promises once there no longer appears to be any profit in doing so.
6. Public access is increasingly limited. You can get journal articles online even at home if you happen to be an employee of a large university. Otherwise, you are out of luck.
7. The publishers demand exclusive copyright from authors, so even they do not have the right to disseminate their work.
8. Universities and the taxpayer pay for most of the work that goes into producing journal articles, and then universities have to buy (or rent) the articles back from the commercial publishers.
9. The publishers have on their side an increasingly restrictive copyright law, which has resulted from lobbying by Hollywood to protect revenue from movies and recordings.

Some other insights:

1. What is the actual cost per article of producing a refereed electronic journal, assuming that referees are not paid but that one does pay for staff, postage, office space, and the computer servers that store the product? There seemed to be a consensus that if you assume a 50% acceptance rate, the cost is about \$500 per article refereed, or about \$1000 per article published.
2. If paper issues are produced and distributed, the cost doubles.
3. A small refereed journal (say fewer than 100 articles accepted per year) can be produced by professors with no formal budget. The *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, mentioned above, is an example. The cost is still there, but it is being absorbed informally by the universities (faculty release time, use of office staff, space, postage, and university computers). This is not an option for a medium-sized or large journal.
4. The situation varies greatly by field. At one extreme is physics. The American Physical Society controls most of the publication in physics in this country. They also only rent their electronic versions to libraries, but they keep the price down, provide a widely used print-server for preprints, and archive in several locations. At another extreme is biomedicine, which is dominated by the commercial publishers, especially Elsevier.
5. A model in which universities pay directly for the costs of refereed publishing (through page charges, for example) and make the product available free online to

everyone would have the disadvantage, in science and engineering, that it would lose revenue from corporate research and development divisions.

Internet resources:

1. The International Mathematical Union's Committee on Electronic Information and Communication (CEIC) provides information to individual researchers about how to deal with copyright issues in order to protect their work.
<http://www.ceic.math.ca/>
2. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) provides information about these issues on its web site. <http://www.arl.org/scomm/>
3. The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC). Set up by the ARL, this organization helps journal editors and editorial board members deal with publishers. <http://www.arl.org/sparc/>
4. CiteSeer: Scientific Literature Digital Library. Maintained by individuals at the NEC Research Institute at Princeton, this program trolls the web and indexes papers that are publicly available. It covers mainly computer science, but it brags of being the world's largest free full-text index of scientific literature.
<http://citeseer.nj.nec.com/cs>

What can be done? Here are some of suggestions speakers offered:

1. **Maintain a personal web site, and post all your articles there in preprint form.** Many journals publishers do not object to this. Elsevier says, "we do not consider that a preprint of an article (including a prior version as a thesis) prior to its submission to Elsevier Science for consideration amounts to prior publication, which would disqualify the work from consideration for re-publication in a journal. We also do not require authors to remove electronic preprints from publicly accessible servers (including the author's own home page) once an article has been accepted for publication."
<http://authors.elsevier.com/PublisherInfoDetail.html?dc=PRP>
2. **Post your preprints on public servers.** For some of the disciplines in our school, the Social Science Research Network (<http://www.ssrn.com/>) is an appropriate server. To the best of my understanding, it is not quite public; there is a fee for downloading some papers, and your university or department is supposed to subscribe. Our Finance and Economics Department does subscribe, and is my impression (perhaps better informed colleagues can correct me) that all members of our school can post and download papers in the fields it covers (accounting, finance, economics, legal scholarship, and management research).
3. **Pay attention to a journal's copyright policy before submitting a paper.** If you are not scrambling for tenure, you may have the flexibility to make copyright policy part of your choice of a journal.
4. **If you are an administrator, make sure your department has a web page that makes it easy to download the research of department members.**
http://www.math-net.org/Math-Net_Page_Help.html provides support for this undertaking.

5. **If you are a journal editor working with a commercial publisher, contact SPARC about what you can do to strengthen your bargaining position with the publisher.**

Much more was said at the meeting, but these are the points that seemed most important to me. I hope that Bikki, dt, and Mike will add their perspectives.

Here is a suggestion of my own. Perhaps we should expect the lists of articles that faculty members submit for evaluation (for promotion, merit pay, or research awards) to list the servers (publisher's web site, JSTOR, personal web site, public servers, semi-public servers, etc.) where each article is available for downloading. In the case of published articles, this would indicate just how available the work really is. In the case of unpublished articles, it would be some indication of how far along it is, at least how willing the author is for others to scrutinize it. I would be interested in your thoughts on this.